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ABSTRACT

This study examined titles of successful books, i.e., those that were best sellers or won literary prizes. In all, 3,239 titles in 71 lists by decade were characterized. The single largest category was popular general fiction followed by general nonfiction. About 49% of the titles won or were nominated for awards, and 45% were best sellers. Most titles were issued in the 1950s through the 1990s. The median book title contained 3.5 words, the mode was 2.4 words, and the mean was 2.8 words. One-word titles accounted for 17% of the sample, two word titles for 34%, three word titles for 20%, and longer titles for 29%. Few titles included color words or place names, but about 16% included the name of a person. Only 2% of the tittles contained a subtitle, and the mean subtitle was 4 words long. Few titles, about 10%, contained a noun or verb word found in another title. There was little significant change over time. Attached tables show the sample distribution by category, sample distribution by decade, title length by category, and title length by decade. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/MES)

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Title Attributes of Successful Books in the United States: 1910 –1990

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Abstract

Titles of successful books, those, which were best sellers or those winning literary prizes, were examined. In all, 3,239 titles in 71 lists by decade were characterized. The single largest category was popular general fiction followed by general nonfiction. About 49 percent of the titles won or were nominated for awards and 45 percent were best sellers. Most titles were issued in the 1950s through the 1990s. The median book title contained 3.5 words, the mode was 2.4 words, and the mean was 2.8 words. One word titles accounted for 17 percent of the sample, two word titles for 34 percent, three word titles for 20 percent, and longer titles for 29 percent. Few titles included color words or place names, but about 16 percent included the name of a person. Only two percent of the titles contained a subtitle and the mean subtitle was 4 words long. Few titles, about 10 percent, contained a noun or verb word found in another title. There was little significant change over time.

Title Attributes of Successful Books in the United States: 1910 –1990

Introduction

There is some anecdotal evidence that selecting the "right" title can make a notable difference in the success of a book. A truly memorable title may be more likely to be reviewed and remembered by literary critics, talk show hosts, information professionals, and by consumers. However, no research-based studies were found that investigated the title attributes of successful books.

Here, success was defined as books that were nominated for or won a literary prize. Such books represent the best of their type of literature. A second definition of success was also used—sales. Titles of best selling books were also examined in order to learn more about the attributes of books that sold the most copies and were particularly successful in the market.

Once established, the attributes of successful book titles should be helpful to those interested in the creation and selling of books. These attributes should also interest librarians who select, retrieve, and recommend books. Surely, the book's title plays an important role in these activities.

It may be that there are informal "norms" which editors and sales/marketing people follow when titles are created and finalized. The purpose of this study is to learn more about these attributes.

Literature Review

No studies were found that examined and analyzed contemporary book title data. Literature on the history of the book includes some mention of the history of the title page. There were anecdotal articles and comments on curious and interesting book titles. Author tips and hints books, articles and WWW sites also comment on how to create successful titles. An example or two of each of these categories is provided below.

History

Margaret Smith's *The Title Page: Its Early Development 1460-1510* is the best historical introduction.[1] Thomas J. Steele provides a brief review of the history of the book title.[2] In the beginning, book titles represented a brief summary or indication of subject. Titles were often the first few words of the text since the author did not assign a title. Medieval books did not have title pages. Title pages date from the 1500s. Early titles were often lengthy and discursive. Stelle also discusses titles based upon proverbs and the Bible.

Andre Bernard combines history and anecdote in a brief, colorful, and interesting commentary on "famous book titles and how they got that way."[3]

Anecdotal

Dorothy Hodder and Robert Anthony note curious titles.[4] *Bimbos of the Death Sun* and *Old Age is Not for Sissies* are examples. Shirley Wilcox provides examples of interesting author – title combinations.[5] Examples include *My Friends, the New Guinea Headhunters* by Benjamin T. Butcher and *Baseball* by Douglas Wallop.

Author Tips

Christina Hamlett discusses how to create an irresistible title.[6] Among other suggestions, titles should "dare the reader to buy," be six words or less, and be easy to pronounce. Dan Poynter notes that "a great title will not sell a bad book, but a poor title will hide a good book from customers."[7] He suggests that nonfiction titles should begin with the subject of the work as the first key word. The title should be "specific, familiar, and short." Tiles should be five words or less and fewer than 92 characters. Avoid beginning the title with a number. Tom and Marilyn Ross in their *Complete Guide to Self-Publishing* suggest that titles should be limited to two to three words, be descriptive, and be lively.[8] Robert Holt, in *How to Publish, Promote, and Sell Your Own Book*, suggests that it is important to use a subtitle.[9]

Research Design

Variables and Hypotheses

This study used three independent variables: (1) whether the title came from a prize list or a best seller list; (2) the category of the work such as general nonfiction or mystery; and (3)) decade or the time period when the title

originated. Dependent variables included: the number of titles on each decade list, median title length, modal title length, mean title length, percentage of one word titles, percentage of two word titles, percentage of three word titles, percentage of titles with more than three words, percentage of titles with a color word, a place word, or a person name, percentage of titles including a subtitle, subtitle mean length, and subtitle median length.

There were three hypotheses. First, title attributes are a function of type so that prize-winning titles will have different attributes than best selling titles. Second, title attributes are a function of category or genre so that titles from different categories will have different attributes. Third, title attributes are a function of time so that titles from different decades will have different attributes. Each hypothesis was tested at the .05 significance level using Oneway Anova.

Source of Titles

Lists of best selling general fiction and nonfiction were taken from 80 *Years of Best Sellers: 1895-1975* and supplementary lists found on the WWW.[10] Mystery awards used included the Dilys Award (Independent Mystery Booksellers Association), the Nero Wolf Award, the Shamus Award (Private Eye Writers of America), the Hammett Award (North American Branch of the International Association of Crime Writers), the Edgar Awards(Mystery Writers of America), and the Macavity Award (Mystery Readers International).[11]The Bram Stoker Award was used to identify successful horror books.[12] Romance novels were taken from the Romance Writers of America RITA finalists and Romantic Times award nominees.[13] Science fiction (includes some fantasy) awards

included the Philip K. Dick Award (paper original edition), the Nebula Award for best novel and finalists for the novel, and the Hugo Award for best novel and finalists for the novel.[14] Westerns used the Spur Award from the Western Writers of America and the more popular titles found on the Western Fiction Bookshelf.[15] The Caldecottt and Newbery Medal Winners were used to identify successful books for youth.[16] American Fiction Prizes was the source of most of the titles for prize winning U.S. fiction with the prizes including the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, the National Book Award Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award.[17] British prize winning fiction was based upon the Whitbread Book Awards and the Booker McConnell prize winners and finalists.[18]

Data Collection

Titles from books on each list were keyed into a text editing application where lines could be sorted to eliminate duplicates within the ten year period. A summary list was then created of unique titles for each decade, for example for 1950 through 1959. After initial articles were deleted, each word in the title was counted. Hyphenated words were counted as one word. Interior articles and the like were counted as words. Subtitles were counted separately. The number of words in each title was counted. The mean, median, and mode were calculated for title length for each category for each list for each decade. Titles were also scanned to see if they included color, place, or person words.

Titles were then sorted into single word lists, which were again sorted alphabetically so that duplicate words could be identified. Where substantial

words, e.g. not *of* or *the*, were duplicated, they were recorded so that most frequently used nouns and verbs could be identified. The number of these words duplicated was compared to the total number of words for all the titles on a particular list.

Data was entered into a data file manipulated by JMP statistical software. Descriptive statistics and statistics on variable relationships were created.

Findings

Success Type

The 71 lists, each for a ten year period, used in the study resulted in 3239 book titles. Success type was the first variable considered. About 49 percent (1579 titles) of the book titles were U.S. award winning or award nominated fiction titles. Seven percent (217 titles) were U.K. award winning or award nominated fiction titles. About 45 percent (1443 titles) were best selling U.S. general fiction or general nonfiction. Titles seemed to represent a good balance between books that sold very well and those that were seen as of high value. It may be, of course, that many of those books that received awards were also the most popular so it is likely that there is overlap between the two list types.

Book Category

Eight book categories were used in this study. Sample distribution by book category is seen in Table One. (Table One about here) Since 82 percent of the sample is from fictional titles, the sample is skewed toward creative or recreational rather than informational works.

Decade

In order to study change over time, book titles were divided into groups by decade. Table Two shows the distribution of the sample by time. (Table Two about here.) With 60 percent of the sample from the period 1970 through the 1990s, trend analysis is strongest for the last three decades.

Main Title Length

For the sample as a whole, the median title length was 3.5 words with the standard deviation being .7 words. Seventy-five percent of all titles had a mean median length of four words or less. Median length was significantly related to category with nonfiction having more title words.

For the sample as a whole, the modal title length was 2.4 words with the standard deviation being .8 words. Seventy-five percent of all titles had a mean modal length of three words or less. The mean title length was 2.8 words with a standard deviation of .5 words. The mean had a correlation of .36 with the mode and .56 with the median so that it is important to use all three of the averages when measuring title length.

Nearly 17 percent of all titles consisted of but one word. The standard deviation was slightly less than 12 percent. One word titles were significantly related to category. Horror at 46.5 percent and general fiction at 21.5 percent were most likely to use one word titles. Nonfiction (10.3 percent) and youth books (11.4 percent) were least likely to use one word titles.

About 33.5 percent of all titles consisted of two words with a standard deviation of nearly 13 percent. There were more two word main titles than any other kind.

Nearly 20 percent of all titles consisted of three words. The standard deviation was about 9 percent.

About 29 percent of all titles contained more than three words. These were the longest titles. The standard deviation was 13.4 percent. There was a significant relationship between long titles and genre. Nonfiction (41 percent) and youth (40 percent) books were most likely to have long titles. Of the genre fiction, mysteries were slightly more likely to have long tiles, but still only 26 percent of mystery titles had titles longer than three words..

It was hypothesized that title length was a function of category. This was partially supported. There was a significant relationship between median length and type with the medians being 3.3 words for U.S. award winning books, 3.3 for U.K. award winning books and 4.0 for best sellers. Interestingly, here best sellers had slightly longer titles. However, there was no significant relationship when length was measured by mean title length. Here the averages were 2.8 for U.S. award winners, 2.7 for U.K. award winners, and 2.9 for bestsellers.

It was hypothesized that title length was a function of category. Table Three (Table Three about here) shows that relationship. There was a significant relationship between title length, whether mode, median, or mean, and category

It was hypothesized that title length was also a function of time, here the decade in which the book was published. Table Four (Table Four about here) summarizes length by time. There was no significant relationship between title length and decade. Average titles in the 1990s were not significantly longer than those in the late 1890s. There was no consistent change in the percentage of one word, two word, three word, or longer than three world titles over time. For example, the percentage of longer titles went from 19 percent in the 1895s to 39.5 percent in the 1960s and ended at 21.9 percent in the 1990s.

Title Word Types

Slightly more than 3 percent of the main titles used color words such as "black" or "red." The standard deviation was 4.4 percent.

Nearly 10 percent of the titles included a place word such as "Rome" or "New York." The standard deviation was about 7 percent. Place words were significantly related to category with westerns (18 percent), nonfiction (12.5 percent), and general fiction (10.7 percent) titles most likely to contain a place name. No horror title included a place name and only 3.5 percent of the romance titles did. Inclusion of place words was significantly related to book type. Best sellers (13.7 percent) were more likely to include place names than award-winning books (7.8 percent but 11.1 percent for the UK award winners).

About 16 percent of the titles included a personal name such as "John F. Kennedy" or "Margaret." The standard deviation was nearly 14 percent. Personal names were significantly related to category. Nearly 31 percent of the youth

books, 18 percent of the general fiction titles, and about 14 percent of the nonfiction titles included a personal name. Horror, romance and SF were least likely to include a personal name in the title.

There was no significant relationship between title word categories and time. The number of titles including a place word went from a low of 7.3 percent in the 1960s to a high of 15 in the 1895s, 1900s, 1910s, and 1930s. The number of tiles including a personal name went from a low of 9.6 percent in the 1990s to a high of 34 percent in the 1895s with several ups and downs in between.

Subtitles

Only 2.3 percent of all titles included a subtitle. The standard deviation was nearly 6 percent. There was no significant relationship between the presence of a subtitle and time. There were more subtitles in the 1920s with about 9 percent, but in recent years the range was from .6 percent in the 1960s, 2.8 percent in the 1970s, 4.5 percent in the 1980s, and 2.2 percent in the 1990s. There was a significant relationship between category and subtitle percentage. Nonfiction and youth works were significantly more likely to include a subtitle. None of the genre fiction categories were likely to have a subtitle.

The mean subtitle was 4.4 words long with a standard deviation of 1.8 words. While there was no significant relationship between subtitle length and time, subtitles were longer in the 1980s and 1990s (5.1 and 5.5 words).

Duplicate Title Words

Duplicate nouns and verbs, ignoring words such as "and," "in," "the" and the like were counted for each list by decade. Even though single titles cannot be copyrighted, few titles contained words found in another title on the list. The median percentage of titles including a duplicate noun or verb was nine with the mean being 10.2 percent. Thus, about 90 percent of the titles examined contained no meaningful duplicate words found in another title on the same ten-year list. Duplicate word percentage was significantly related to category with nonfiction and general fiction having the highest percentage of duplicate words at 22.5 and 10.8 percent and horror was the lowest at 2 percent. Of the fictional genres, the western title (8.5 percent of titles had a substantial duplicate word) was most likely to contain words found in another title.

For horror fiction winning the Bram Stoker Award, only one duplicate word was found: "bones" was used in two titles.

"Story," "poems," "snow," and "day" were the duplicate words in the 129 Caldecott and Newbery Medal Winners. Each of these words was found in two different titles.

There were 341 mystery novels with 31 duplicate words. Most were duplicated only once. The most frequently duplicated words were dead (15 times), murder (14), death (8), kill (7), cold (6), blue (5), and devil (4).

The 493 romance titles appeared to have more substantial duplication in titles than the other popular fiction genres. There were 54 words that appeared in more than one title. Words most often duplicated include: heart (22 times), love

(16), bride (15), dream (15), night (13), angel (10), rose (9), remember (6), and wild (6.)

The 234 science fiction (includes some fantasy) titles included 21 duplicate words but only three words were used more than twice: time (4 times), mars (3), and sun (3). "Alien" was only used in two titles.

For the 154 western novels there were only eighteen duplicate words, with only three words were more than twice: river (5 times), mountain (4), and long (4). Words often associated with this genre such as gun, horse, ride, and trail were only found in two titles in a ten year period.

General nonfiction with 568 titles had the 87 duplicate words. The leading duplicates include: home (26), garden (25 times), better (22 times), cook and variants (20), you or your (20), life (13), year (13), new (10) and American (9). The best selling Better Homes and Gardens cookbooks had a substantial impact here.

Popular general fiction, because of the larger number of titles (1015), had 70 duplicate words but few were used in more than two or three titles. Here were the most used words: man (23 times), love (8), house (6), woman (6), time (6), daughter (4), and heaven (4).

The 263 prize-winning U.S. novels had 29 duplicate words, but only only ten were used more than twice. These words were love (11 times), stories (6), white (5), other (5), dance (3), hotel (3), island (3), lake (3), dead (3), and house (3).

The 218 prize-winning British novels had 23 duplicate words, but only five appeared in more than two titles: last (4 times), England (3), every (3), good (3), and hotel (3).

Conclusions

Although there is some statistical significance between title length and category, it is reasonable to conclude that most titles will be between three and four words long and this does not seem to vary much over time or type. Nonfiction titles are usually a little bit longer. This is shorter than the five or six words suggested to prospective authors, but certainly makes the point that a successful title is usually a short title.

While subtitles provide an opportunity for the author to more clearly identify the nature or the scope of the work, very few book titles included a subtitle. The successful title, even in nonfiction, normally will include only a main title.

It may be interesting to find titles that begin with or include a number (could create filing problems on the shelf) or a color, but again few successful book titles include these elements. A fair number of fiction and nonfiction titles do include a personal name of a main character in the work so that might provide a title opportunity, especially if the character has a name likely to grab the attention of the prospective reader.

A brief review on nonfiction titles found that most did not include a clear subject descriptor as the first word. For example, *Arthritis and Common Sense* does include the subject in the first word while *How To Play Your Best Golf* does not. The latter is far more common. Placing a subject descriptor at the beginning of the title would certainly inhibit creative titles and may result in a title with little "zip."

Although single titles cannot be copyrighted, there was very little duplication of title words. Contrary to the assumption that genre fiction, for example, includes many quite similar titles with stereotypical words and associations, genre fiction titles had little duplication and contained few of the obvious words that might be associated with the genre. Particularly for fiction, successful titles are unique and express their appeal and content with words that differ from those of the book next door.

Recommendations For Further Research

Trend analysis needs to be done in the next few years to see if 3.5 words continue to the standard length. More best seller lists might be identified and included in what would be a larger and more representative sample. Book club selections would be another way to identify successful books. Horror, western novels and books for youth were under-represented in this study so more of these titles should be added where possible.

It would also be interesting to measure the overlap between best sellers and award winners to see how often the "best" books are also the most popular books.

Most interesting would be research using interviews with authors, editors, and sales managers to learn more about the title creation and assignment process. Perhaps informal rules or guidelines may be identified. Similarly, interviewing book buyers, either corporate or individual, might provide insight into the degree to which titles attract attention and lead to a sale.

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Table One

Sample Distribution by Category

Type	Number of titles	Percentage
General fiction	1293	40
General nonfiction	578	18
Romance	434	13
Science fiction	311	10
Mystery	302	9
Western	145	5
Youth	149	
Horror	27	1

Table Two

Sample Distribution by Decade

Decade	Number of titles	Percentage
1890	47	1
1900	86	3
1910	126	4
1920	164	5
1930	178	5
1940	188	6
1950	227	7
1960	305	9
1970	387	12
1980	404	13
1990	1127	35

Table Three

Title Length and Category

	Mean	Mode	Median
Fiction general	2.5	2.0	3.4
Horror	2.2	1.5	2.8
Mystery	2.9	2.3	3.7
Nonfiction	3.4	3.3	4.6
Romance	2.5	2.5	3.1
SF	2.5	2.1	3.3
Western	2.6	2.2	3.2
Fiction youth	3.1	2.8	3.4

Table Four

Title Length and Time

	Mean	Mode	Median
1895-	2.6	2.0	3.5
1900s	2.6	2.0	4.0
1910s	2.7	2.0	3.3
1920s	2.8	3.0	3.5
1930s	2.8	2.7	3.7
1940s	2.8	2.3	3.4
1950s	3.0	2.6	3.3
1960s	3.1	2.6	3.7
1970s	2.9	2.6	3.7
1980s	2.6	1.9	3.3
1990s	**2.6**	2.2	3.5

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